



Splendid isolation

Maybe there's something in the water, or perhaps it's just our geographical distance from mainstream influences. Whatever the cause, there's no doubt the nation is dancing to a distinctly West Australian beat. **text**> Sarah Szabo

Philip Stevens has just ushered a television crew from a current affairs team out of his Fremantle office. He hasn't eaten lunch and another interviewer wants his time. Assistants rugby-tackle the calls as they come in and politely take messages. He's getting used to it – Philip is John Butler's manager.

Making history at the Australasian Performing Rights Association (APRA) awards by winning the peer-voted Song of the Year when you're a self-published, singer-songwriter with no major label

backing and an Australia-wide No.1 album with double platinum status (and rising) tends to excite the hordes. Thirty-year-old dreadlocked hippies from Pinjarra (via California) playing bluesy, reggae rock are never a shoo-in against winsome soapie starlet crooners and their marketing juggernauts.

John Butler maintains he never set out to take on the multinationals. "I just set out to live my dream and it kind of went that way. We showed everyone that we could do it that way but no one was really interested until it was too late," he says.

"The multinationals were there once we had sold 30,000 albums but for me it just meant they were interested in the money."

The John Butler Trio and Philip Stevens are riding that sweet wave that comes to few, but is desired by many. They are, in short, hot.

And, if you believe the glossies, so is Perth in general. "Is Perth the new Paris?" asked *Australian Vogue*, citing an extraordinary number of West Australians like John Butler as leading the scene in the music and entertainment world. Even *The*

Bulletin, a magazine with its pen more firmly poised on politics than pop, has seen fit to comment on our rising stocks (and we're talking musical, not financial). Hype and hyperbole go hand in hand with the territory, yet we do seem to have come across all renaissance.

Witness Luke Steele from The Sleepy Jackson, with his smeared makeup, outrageous hair and penchant for wearing outfits suitable for a children's party. (Nothing says "Je suis un Rock Star" like dodgy grooming and inappropriate attire).

His sister Katy Steele's band, Little Birdy, has a big presence and, with a debut album out in October, is a safe bet for the next big thing. Two of the band's songs appeared 16th and 25th respectively in Triple J's 2003 Hottest 100 chart – the biggest public music poll in Australia – and Katy has been warmly compared with the legendary PJ Harvey. "There is a serious vibe going on in Perth," she says. "I sound like a hippy, but it's true. It is all a bit incestuous but everyone feeds off each other in a good way."

If you can't hum the tune or sing the refrain from the Waifs' smash hit *London Still*, you are very unusual and possibly dead. Still-living legend Bob Dylan became a fan after The Waifs opened for him in Australia and then insisted on their company for his North American and European tours (they call him Bob).

With the likes of Eskimo Joe, The Hampdens and End of Fashion, the sounds of Perth are the

musical "it" girl of the moment. And we are not talking Britney-style manufactured pap aimed at the prepubescent dollar – it's "lush instrumentation and solid grooves" (*Rolling Stone* on Eskimo Joe); "a shimmering blend of acoustic strings, down-tempo beats, gorgeous pop melodies and soulful lyrics" (Sony on The Hampdens); and "truly great guitar playing" (Melbourne's *The Age* on John Butler). It's music for grownups that's walking off the shelves like hipster jeans and crop tops. Basically, if you didn't already live in Perth, you'd be forgiven for wanting to get here quickly before you're any more unfashionable. Vive la Perth.

Paul Bodlovich, the executive director of the WA Music Industry Association (WAMI), believes Perth's isolation factor is an important element in the equation. "West Australians generally are very outward looking people," he says. "We feel that we are inherently more isolated so we actually absorb a lot more of the world's culture than people who live in places that they think are the centre of the earth." John Butler agrees. "Perth's isolation is a real special thing, it helps breed something unique," he says. "Look at Australia's animals – we have really different and interesting animals because we are isolated and we have an interesting outlook on music for the same reason."

Although Paul believes that WAMI itself and WA's contemporary music funding, administered by ArtsWA, have certainly assisted a number of

bands with opportunities, "the simple fact is that we are actually just producing really good bands, particularly over the past few years".

As a manager, to have one band reaching the zenith of the nation's charts is exceptional, two looks like serious machinations are afoot and a third waiting in the wings is positively unholy. Philip Stevens runs Jarrah Records, the independent label co-owned by John Butler and The Waifs, and also manages Little Birdy on the side. A complete lack of formal business training, a diploma in environmental biology, and experience as a waiter and decorator have obviously created something greater than the sum of its parts. "To have a role in music without actually having a musical bone in my body was a wonderful realisation," says Philip.

John Butler and The Waifs had been putting in the hard yards for years, touring, releasing records and building up a grassroots fan base. Their shared folksy roots had seen them cross paths in Perth's small-knit music community and a friendship was formed. Jarrah Records was created in 2002 at Philip's suggestion, essentially to release albums in the US. "It has been nice to have a name and an icon so we can sit alongside the Sonys and the BMGs and the Warners and we can proudly say that we are Jarrah Records," Philip says.

John Butler agrees that "it has taken us out of the vague ambiguous world of the independents where you kind of get lumped into a big pile of many mean-

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Philip Stevens of Jarrah Records.

ings and when we are doing well the credit gets focused".

And focused it has been. The Waifs cleaned up at last year's Australian Record Industry Association awards (ARIA's) and the John Butler Trio's *Sunrise Over Sea* album debuted at No.1 on the national ARIA albums chart, closely followed by the single *Zebra* being named APRA song of the year. The album is set for release in the US next March, aided by a deal with Lava Records, an imprint of Warners Music. Jarrah Records is now being recognised as the most successful independent label in Australia. "We have done good," says John, with classic understatement.

Philip admits to a drive and competitive nature that seems to work well for the business side of the industry, but identifies an intangible element to the label's success. "There is a magic quality with the

people I have been lucky enough to work with and that doesn't happen very often," he says. "John's passion for what he does and the way that he plays and the fact that you can't help but fall in love with The Waifs when you see them live – they are so charming and funny. Most bands don't have that quality and never will."

Little Birdy, together for less than two years, is also showing the kind of promise that threatens something supernatural. "Musically the band is just growing together because we formed without really knowing each other," says Katy. "We have only started to get to know each other properly in the past six months so it has been a big learning curve for everyone. I have only been writing songs for a few years so it is all kinda new to me too."

Philip admits he got close to begging Little Birdy for the manager's gig because others were

starting to circle. "She has an incredible voice and songwriting ability for a young person," he says of Katy.

Competing with the major players in the music industry is very much a David and Goliath scenario, yet Philip has always seen a level playing field. He believes there is an obvious power that comes from having lots of acts, including international ones, on a label, yet "maybe we spend our money a lot wiser". "The more records we sell, the more the finances come through," he says. "And we are selling a lot of records which means we can compete in stronger markets." He remains adamant that WA will continue to be the base for Jarrah Records, believing that "you can't take over the world from here but you can look after Australia". Next year will, however, include a couple of months in New York to begin work on the world domination project.

Incidentally, the rewards are there for the artist who can make it independently. According to Philip, an artist on a major label might receive \$2 to \$3 per album sold and from that they have to pay back the advance they received to make the album (generally not less than \$100,000). "There are a lot of occasions where bands with fairly big names do not recoup their money back for the company," says Philip. Independent artists who are responsible for the manufacture and marketing of their own CDs can make \$10 to \$12 per album sold. "If the record has been made cheaply, an artist can still make a profit from selling 5000 to 10,000 copies," he says. *Sunrise Over Sea* has sold 170,000 copies to date. Ditto for The Waifs' last release *Up All Night*. You do the maths.

For his part, John Butler is taking the accolades in his stride. "I guess the best thing is that you get to share your music and your art and your heart with so many people," he says. "To inspire by example and be inspired by people – it is an honour to be able to have that position."

Six years ago he was busking to handfuls of shoppers in Fremantle Markets, this year arenas across Australia were pasting up "sold out" stickers within days. For John, though, the size of the audience doesn't matter.

"It just matters that there is an intimacy between the artist and the audience," he says. "There needs to be a connection and respect from both of us towards each other and where there is that intimacy, you can really go on a journey with the audience. You can play really soft and they will listen and then play really full-on numbers and we will all go together."

Katy Steele from Little Birdy sums up the feeling that there has been a little stardust in the WA ozone of late. "There has just been so many amazing things happening," she says. "It is always just about the music but if you can do something a bit more special than the average band, that's the thing. I am just rolling with it but we are making the music that we want to make and having fun. It is wicked." ●

Luke Steele from The Sleepy Jackson.

